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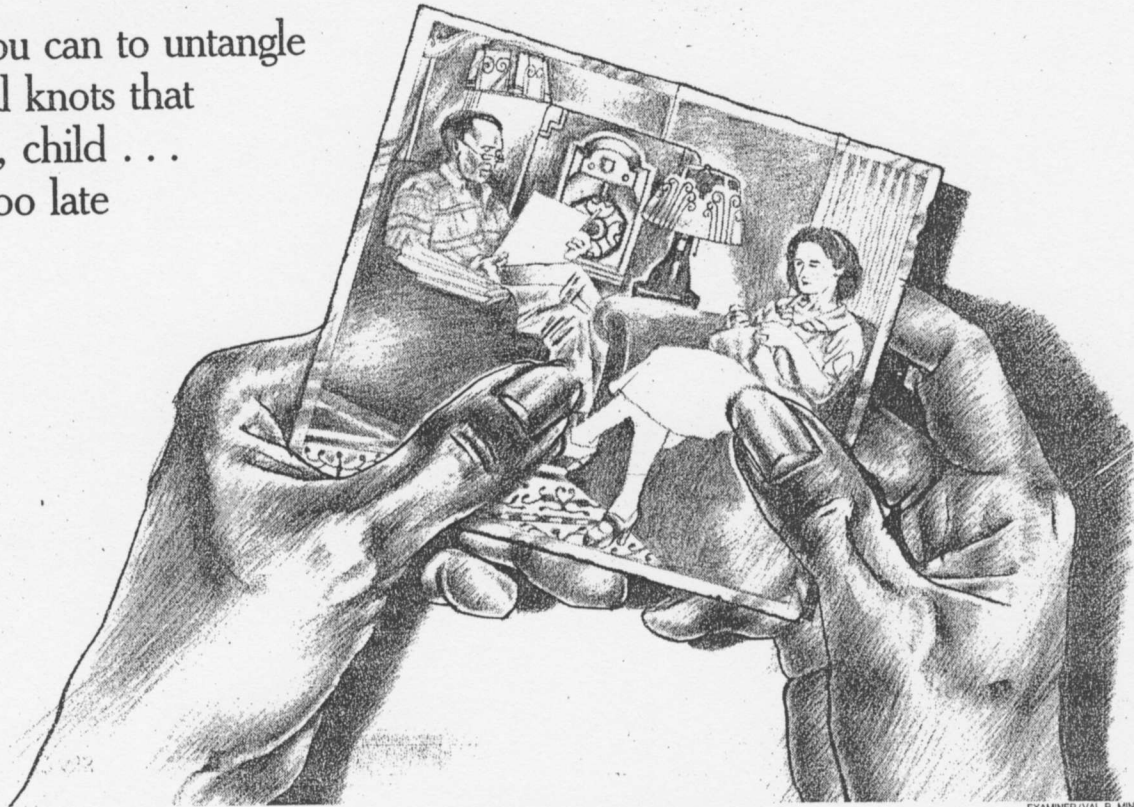
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PSYCHOLOGY

Unfinished business

Do what you can to untangle the universal knots that bind parent, child . . . before it's too late



EXAMINER/VAL B. MINA

By Margie Patlak
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

AFTER HER mother died at the age of 81, 37-year-old Terese Veronica found herself haunted by memories of the mother she never had. "I wanted to know what my mom was like when she was my age," Veronica said. "Why did she study engineering, why did she marry my dad, what was the man like she was engaged to before my dad — those are things I'll never know."

Learning about parents as people is just part of the unfinished business an adult child should try to take care of before death knocks on their door. Psychologists and other experts who dredge up the concerns stirred in an adult by the loss of a mother or father have uncovered a number of universal knots in the ties

that bind parent and child. If these knots aren't untangled, they can make the adults mourning for their parent more painful and protracted.

"We all have to deal with our parents' deaths eventually," says clinical social worker Jan Hernandez, who is the project coordinator at the Children of Aging Parents organization in Philadelphia. "But usually we deal with this reality very badly and with a lot of unne-

cess of the psychological business left unresolved between parent and child, she adds, "almost literally the parent comes back to haunt you."

Those children who make an effort to resolve things before a parent dies, however, are often rewarded. Gerontologist Andrew Scharlach, of USC, studied the grief response of more than 200 middle-aged adults who had lost a parent in recent years. "Those peo-

ple make a clean slate of things by telling parents what they meant to them or telling them things they did that bothered them coped with the loss much better," Scharlach says.

Expressing unspoken feelings

The business adult children should try to take care of with their parents includes finding out family history, expressing unspoken feelings, putting the past behind them, figuring out their parents' importance in their life, and gaining more sympathy and understanding of their parents as people.

The sooner such business is taken care of, the better, says psychologist Michael Hoyt of UC-San Francisco. "Whatever you would like to say to your parents on their deathbed, say to them today," says Hoyt, who studied the grief response adults have to the loss of their parents. "You shouldn't wait until the last minute, because you can't predict when someone's going to die."

Despite Hollywood depictions of the family gathered around mom or dad on his or her deathbed, most children are not present when their parents die. A Philadelphia Geriatric Center study of 200

'You won't change history, but you will get rid of a lot of excess baggage.'

— Jan Hernandez

sons revealed that two-thirds had no family with them when they passed on.

The chance to say goodbye

Veronica never got a chance to say goodbye to her mother, who died unexpectedly of heart failure. "I wish I had told her I loved her and thought she was a good mother," she says. "When my mother was alive I chose to see all the things that were wrong with her that she was always tired when I was a kid; that she didn't do fun things with us, that her legs always bothered her. Now that she's gone I feel so stupid for maintaining this coldness towards her. What's the point of not being affectionate with my mother because I didn't like her for how she treated me when I was

"Most of us go through our adult lives trying to get things from our parents that we never got from them as kids," says Scharlach. "At some point, we have to accept that we didn't get everything we needed or wanted as children but we're no longer children."

To gain acceptance of how parents were in the past, it helps to air grievances with them and try to understand why they did what they did. An adult child may want to ask them why his brother was dealt more of the affection in the family, for example, or tell parents he resented them seeing him only as an extension of themselves. "You won't change history," says Hernandez. "But you will get rid of a lot of excess baggage."

Airing grievances

Airing grievances can sometimes make it easier for an adult child to express her love to her parent. Never saying "I love you" to a mother or father is high up on the list of regrets people have once the parent dies, according to Mark Edinberg, director of the Center for the Study of Aging at the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and author of the recent book "Talking With Your Aging Parents." Her-